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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, EAP/EP, INR, OES/STC, OES/IHA
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR ANE AND GH
STATE PASS TO USTR FOR DBISBEE
HHS/OSSI/DSI PASS TO OGHA (WSTIEGER/LVALDEZ/CHICKEY), FIC/NIH
(GLASS), FDA (MPLAISER)
CDC/COGH FOR SBLOUT/KMCCALL/RARTHUR, PASS TO NCZVED/DFBMD/EDEB
(RTAUXE/EMINTZ) AND GDD, IEIP, DEOC
USDA PASS TO APHIS, FAS (OSTA AND OCRA), FSIS
BANGKOK FOR CDC (MMALISON/SMALONEY/AHENDERSON), USAID/RDM/A
(CBOWES/JMACARTHUR), APHIS (NCARDENAS), REO(JWALLER)
ROME FOR FAO

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [ETRD](#) [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [EFIN](#) [ETRD](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: VIETNAM STRUGGLES TO ENSURE FOOD SAFETY IN ITS DOMESTIC
MARKET

REF: A. HANOI 1924 B. HANOI 1891 C. HANOI 1841 D. HANOI 1511

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11. (SBU) Summary: Recent media reports of contaminated foods in the marketplace have drawn public attention to Vietnam's struggle to improve its domestic food safety controls. Vegetables, fruits, and animal products contaminated with toxins are common in Vietnam and the number of food poisoning cases continues to climb. The recent cholera outbreak in and around Hanoi highlights the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) difficulties in preventing food-borne illnesses. Eager to develop its food exports, the GVN has done a better job of ensuring the safety of its food products sold abroad. Hanoi would like to replicate that relative success and is now planning measures to more effectively address food safety at home. In September, the Prime Minister approved a national program to improve food safety and the Ministry of Health began to draft a new Food Safety Law. The GVN recently asked the United States, which earlier provided technical assistance to upgrade Vietnam's food inspection practices, for additional help in crafting its food safety regime. End Summary.

Food Scares Hit Vietnam

12. (U) The Vietnamese media has been providing consumers with a string of alarming reports of dangerous pesticides on fruit and vegetables and cancer-causing chemicals, including the recognized carcinogen formaldehyde, in soy sauce and "pho" noodle soup. A recent survey by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's (MARD) Plant Protection Department found pesticides on 30 to 60 percent of the vegetables tested in Hanoi markets, including substances banned in Vietnam and other countries. For example, metamidophos, one such banned insecticide, has been found in Vietnamese produce. Although metamidophos has been linked to health problems in China, Hong Kong, South Korea and the United States, Vietnamese farmers continue to apply it to crops to control insects.

Vietnamese inspectors have also found plant-protection sprays, heavy metal, antibiotics and micro-organisms on agricultural products.

13. (U) According to statistics from the Ministry of Health's (MOH) Food Safety and Hygiene Department, over the first nine months of 2007 Vietnam experienced 5,368 cases of serious food poisoning requiring medical attention, a 22.4 percent jump over the same period last year. Tran Dang, Director of the Ministry of Health (MOH) General Department of Food Safety and Hygiene told us that 34 people have died this year due to food poisoning.

14. (SBU) Early reports have tentatively linked the origin of the recent cholera outbreak affecting northern Vietnam to consumption of raw food, especially shrimp paste (ref B). Poor hygienic conditions in food processing and food preparation may be helping to spread the disease (ref A). To fight the spread of the problem, the GVN has banned the sale of shrimp paste in certain northern provinces and urged the population to avoid uncooked foods. Anecdotal reports suggest spotty compliance in Hanoi.

Many Risks to Domestic Food Safety

15. (SBU) In Vietnam, ensuring safe food products depends on many factors, including food industry knowledge and training capacity, animal breeding conditions, soil quality, fertilizer usage, animal feed purity, harvesting practices, protection against insects and disease, food preservation techniques, processing equipment, transportation hygiene and consumption habits. Unsafe food is still imported across borders, and counterfeit, low quality and out-of-date food is sold in markets. These factors particularly impact foods for local consumption, including those from poorly sanitized food processing facilities and mass kitchens. Contrary to the large-scale entities which produce for export, small-scale facilities (an estimated 80 percent of the 390,000 food producers

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are considered to be small-scale or household producers) carry out most food production for the domestic market. The GVN does not have the capacity to ensure clean facilities, equipment, and practices for these smaller, and often informal, entities. In contrast to its more robust inspection program for exports (ref D), Tran Dang, Director at the General Department of Food Safety and Hygiene, told us that Vietnam lacked well-trained inspection staff and "has no inspectors specialized in food safety" for the domestic market.

Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen?

16. (SBU) Although the GVN introduced an Ordinance on Food Safety in November 2003 and instituted implementing regulations in September 2004, it has yet to coordinate effectively its food safety efforts. Despite recommendations from many observers, including Gia Phan, the Vice-Chairman and Secretary General of the Standards and Consumer Protection Association of Vietnam, that the government assign one ministry as the lead agency for food safety, many GVN ministries continue to share responsibility. For example, MARD regulates the food production stage, the Ministry of Industry and Trade watches food processing and the MOH ensures the safety of food reaching the dinner table. (Note: the recently-announced merger of the Ministry of Fisheries into MARD might remove overlapping layers of responsibility for some products.) Additionally, industrial organizations play an important role in ensuring food quality. Vietnam relies upon a mixture of decrees, circulars, and statements issued by various ministries and provincial authorities to address food safety. Most of these documents, however, focus on setting out bureaucratic responsibilities instead of food management standards. An MOH analysis noted that overlapping responsibilities, a short-term focus, poor implementation and weak enforcement led to gaps in food safety control.

Catering to the Export Market

17. (SBU) Eager to develop its food exports, Vietnam has done a

better job of ensuring the safety of its food products sold for export markets abroad. Vietnam cooperates closely with its trade partners to try to ensure the safety and hygiene of its agricultural exports. Relatively few Vietnamese agricultural shipments have been found unsafe. Vietnamese exports to the United States have a track record similar to those of Indonesia and Thailand. Vietnam would like to increase its agricultural exports (particularly fruits), by selling a broader product mix. To date, however, a number of its major trade partners, including the United States, have yet to provide sanitary and phyto-sanitary clearances for such intended exports as dragon fruit, longan, lychee, and rambutan. Additionally, despite Vietnamese cooperation with U.S. regulatory authorities to ensure top quality shipments (ref D), some health concerns remain over current Vietnamese exports. For example, the United States has in the past rejected a relatively small number of Vietnamese shipments of aquatic products due to the presence of veterinary drug residues. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other USG agencies continue to monitor Vietnamese practices.

GVN Wants to Upgrade Food Safety Protections

18. (SBU) According to the Vietnam Food Safety and Agriculture Health Action Plan, the Vietnamese economy loses over USD one billion each year in production losses and missed export possibilities due to pests and food-borne diseases. Aside from the impact on the

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domestic market, an inadequate food safety network limits potential growth for Vietnamese agricultural exports, which totaled USD 9.6 billion in 2006. Currently, Vietnam's major agricultural exports include seafood, vegetables, cashew nuts, coffee, tea, spices, rice and instant noodles, which it sends primarily to the United States, EU, Japan, China, Australia, Singapore, Germany, Indonesia, UK, and Taiwan. Agricultural exports to the United States surpassed USD one billion in the first 9 months of 2007, according to U.S. Bureau of the Census trade data.

19. (U) To prevent these losses and maintain a reputation as an exporter of safe products, the GVN is paying greater attention to food safety. In his annual report to the National Assembly in October, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung repeatedly noted Vietnam's need to upgrade its food safety and hygiene practices and stated that Vietnam would develop a Food Safety Law to organize, manage and ensure food quality. The PM has assigned the MOH, in coordination with the Ministry of Justice, primary responsibility to draft the law. Two weeks earlier, the Prime Minister approved a five-year USD 81 million national food hygiene and safety program covering food quality and food production management. The program also includes efforts to control diseases spread via food and foodstuffs. According to MOH's Dang, the GVN is committed to follow regional and international standards to ensure food safety. Dang also noted that his department was creating food hygiene inspection teams in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which will train up to 12,000 food inspectors. If successful, MOH might expand the program nationwide.

Hungry for More Assistance from the FDA

110. (SBU) In his initial meeting with the Ambassador in late October, Vietnam's new Minister of Health Nguyen Quoc Trieu listed food safety as one of his top three priorities and requested U.S. FDA assistance to upgrade Vietnamese capacity (ref C). One week earlier, the MOH Food Administration Department sought financial and technical assistance in crafting the new Food Safety Law. These new requests come on the heels of recent U.S. assistance to Vietnamese food safety authorities, including a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) training course for senior Vietnamese meat inspectors and a Food and Agricultural Export Alliance (FAEA) led workshop in Vietnam

for government and private sector officials on Codex Alimentarius and WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement. The FDA Assistant Commissioner for International Affairs will review continued cooperation with Vietnamese health and food safety officials during a planned visit to Vietnam in mid-December.

¶11. (U) Vietnam is also turning to other donors and international partners to address this issue. At a World Bank meeting in November to gather input on next year's theme for Innovation Day, the GVN representative pushed for food safety over two other proposed themes of gender and governance.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: As the local press attention has highlighted, Vietnam must do more to address food safety. Domestically, contaminated foods sicken tens of thousands every year. Public reaction to these stories has been strong, with many people expressing irritation that the GVN has not been able to do more to ensure that the food they consume is safe. Vietnam has implemented effective, although not perfect, safety regulations, practices and procedures for its food exports by coordinating with the exporting industries and cooperating closely with its trading partners. Hanoi would clearly like to replicate that relative success domestically, and has turned to international donors for assistance. U.S. assistance could have a positive impact here, with the potential to improve public health, continue to advance Vietnamese regulatory controls for exports and strengthen ties between food safety experts that can help promote U.S. agricultural exports to Vietnam. The upcoming visit of the FDA Assistant Commissioner for International Affairs is a timely opportunity to address these issues. End comment.

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¶13. (U) Post coordinated this cable with Ho Chi Minh City.

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